

## What did you do in school today?

Transforming classrooms through social, academic and intellectual engagement

First National Report Summary

February 2009

This summary was prepared by Jodene Dunleavy (National Coordinator – *Engaged in Learning*) from the original report written by J. Douglas Willms, Sharon Friesen, and Penny Milton. The complete version of this report, which also includes a discussion of school and classroom practices that can make a difference for deepening student engagement in learning, will be published as part of a series in April 2009. The full series of papers includes,

1. *What did you in school today? Transforming classrooms through social, academic and intellectual engagement: First National Report.*
2. *Engaged in Learning – Exploring the Concept Student Engagement and its Implications for Canadian Classrooms.*
3. *Effective Teaching Practices: A Framework and Rubric.*

All papers will be available on CEA's website ([www.cea-ace.ca](http://www.cea-ace.ca)).

*Engaged in Learning* is a three-year research and development initiative of the Canadian Education Association (CEA), funded through collaboration with the Canadian Council on Learning (CCL) and a number of Canadian school districts. Launched in 2007, the initiative was designed to capture, assess and inspire new ideas about enhancing the learning experiences of adolescents in classrooms and schools. *What did you do in school today?* is a survey of students in participating districts. Research and development work is being carried out through CEA's partnership with the Galileo Educational Network and The Learning Bar Inc.

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*Dear CEA, I'm not exactly sure why I'm e-mailing you, but I guess I could use all the support I can get. I'm a 15 year-old guy from the suburbs of Vancouver, Canada. I guess you could say I'm one of those people that have "fallen through the cracks". I am in fact a gifted student, and for the past two years I've tried looking for a school where I could perform to the best of my abilities - a place where I could pursue my passion for film production, where I could integrate courses into one big project, where I could use technology to its full capacity; a place where I could fit in. Paul (2006)*

*hi - i found you on the web. i'm about to get kicked out of school again' cos of lates and skips. i want to be a subway train driver so i have to get my grade 12. i do want to learn but they don't understand that i can't learn this way. is there a different way to get a high school diploma in Ontario? Kevin (2007)*

Paul and Kevin are real Canadian students. They illustrate a complex challenge faced by educators: how to engage students whose passions don't fit within the traditional curriculum, students who could do better at their studies, students who put in the time but make little effort, students who are invested only in "passing the test," students who tune out, and those who drop out.

Many students thrive during adolescence: They are deeply engaged in their studies, participate in—and often lead—school and community activities, and seem set for life as they move on to post-secondary education with certificates and awards in hand. But many others “withdraw from the learning process, in body or in spirit, before they have achieved the level of knowledge and understanding needed to succeed as adults in today's world”. (Dunning, 2008, p. 3)

There are no easy answers to show us what to do about students who go to school only to be in the band or on the sports team, but who otherwise skip class and care little about assignments; those who seem equally unsuccessful in academic or applied programs; or those who have come to believe that they can't learn, at least not in school.

## **Engaged in Learning**

The challenges faced by adolescent students are clear. There is growing concern about the number of students who are dropping out or tuning out of school, and about the gaps in achievement among different groups of students. Evidence is mounting (see, for example: Bowlby & McMullen, 2002; National Research Council, 2003) to show that many problems experienced by students in middle and secondary schools—such as disengagement, dissatisfaction with their schooling experience, and dropping out—are significantly linked to the learning environment (see, for example, Pope, 2001).

More recently, attention has also turned to the widening gap between the in-school and out-of-school lives of students—specifically to the different ways that young people use communications technologies; to the unaddressed diversity of the student population; and to the need to equip all young people for success in a period of massive, rapid and unpredictable social, technological and economic change.

In 2006, the Canadian Education Association (CEA) adopted a focus on adolescent learners as its core priority and in 2007 it launched the *Engaged in Learning*, a three-year initiative aimed at capturing, assessing and enhancing the learning experiences of adolescents in schools and classrooms across Canada. It is called *Engaged in Learning* because it studies, among other things, how adolescents are currently spending their time in the classroom and how engaged they are intellectually and in the life of the school.

The first year of our work together has been an extraordinary learning experience. With generous support and valuable feedback from participating school districts, we have developed a conceptual

framework for the initiative and extended our understanding of the initiative's meaning for students and teachers in classrooms. With a full year of data from 93 schools in 10 school districts participating in the *What did you do in school today?* survey, we have also been able to explore early national findings.

## Student Engagement

In the course of our conceptual and research work for *Engaged in Learning*, we identified three distinct, but inter-related dimensions of student engagement: social, academic and intellectual. The first two dimensions – social and academic – have framed much of the literature on engagement over the past two decades. Intellectual engagement, by contrast, is only beginning to be understood as central to learning.

### *The Dimensions of Student Engagement*

	Social Engagement	Academic Engagement	Intellectual Engagement
<b>Definition</b>	Meaningful participation in the life of the school.	Active participation in the requirements for school success.	Serious emotional and cognitive investment in learning.
<b>Factors Influencing Engagement</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School teams, clubs, student government, and school-wide campaigns such as environment week.</li> <li>• Positive relationships with peers and adults.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Defined curriculum outcomes.</li> <li>• Assignments, tests, and marks.</li> <li>• Teacher and parental encouragement.</li> <li>• Direct and indirect consequences.</li> <li>• Individual student effort.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Instructional Challenge: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Curriculum as discipline.</li> <li>- Exploration, understanding of concepts.</li> <li>- Development of ideas through disciplines and work on authentic problems.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Individual and collective knowledge building.</li> </ul>
<b>Developmental Outcomes</b>	Friendships, social networks, sense of belonging, self-confidence, and often enjoyment of school.	Academic success, credit accumulation, and high school graduation. Post-secondary destinations. Orientation to good work and personal responsibility.	Confidence as knowledge-builders, problem-solvers, conceptual thinkers, confident self-motivated learners. Orientation to original work and often collaboration.

In addition to building on the established concepts of social and academic engagement, *Engaged in Learning* contributes to the newer concept of intellectual engagement by introducing a set of measures that allows us to explore what students are doing in classrooms; how they feel about their experiences of learning; and, whether the work they do contributes to learning. Students' experiences provide a starting point for investigating how classroom practices, including the ways in which the work is designed for students and other factors such time, how students are grouped for learning, and the physical environment of classrooms, can be improved to create more effective and engaging learning environments.

## Why is Student Engagement Important?

A great deal of thinking about educational change as it relates to student achievement and engagement is framed in terms of preparing students for their future after graduation from high school—to help students toward a good job or in the transition to post-secondary learning. However, we also have to recognize that young people’s engagement in school affects not just their future, but the quality of their daily lives and experiences *now*.

It is important to remember that young people are not just adults-in-training; their lives as they experience them now are as valuable and meaningful as those of the adults they will become. How they feel about school and how “well” they do is, for most young people, central to their daily lives—whether they feel good about themselves and cared for at school; whether they are frustrated, anxious, bored, or depressed; whether they feel vibrant and excited by what they are learning; and, for that matter, whether they are learning at all.

Disengagement from school—whether a student leaves or struggles through to graduation—is also a significant source of inequity in Canadian society, not only because it places a large number of students at a disadvantage as they move into adult roles, but because disengagement is disproportionately experienced by students living in poverty, students with disabilities, and students from ethnic minority and Aboriginal communities (Audas & Willms, 2001; Caledon Institute for Social Policy, 2006; Community Health Systems Resource Group, 2005; Richards & Vining, 2004). As we are seeing in other countries and increasingly in this country, disengagement *in* and *from* school is linked to states of youth disaffection and violence, social exclusion, and social polarization severe enough to pose a threat to social cohesion in Canada.

If we are going to change how students are engaged, we have to agree on one thing ... We must keep it to learning ... social, academic and intellectual engagement. I think everyone is capable of balancing all three. Now we ask, how is it going to work?

(William Zhang, 2009)

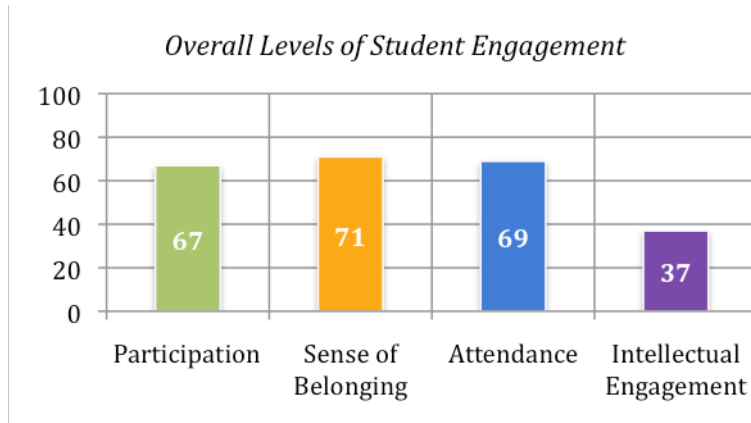
From the perspectives of both human and social development, participation and engagement in learning are key to both individual and collective well-being. According to a 2008 World Health Organization report, engagement and participation are important for “social development, health, and well-being” because “[r]estricted participation results in deprivation of human capabilities” (Commission on Social Determinants of Health, 2008, p. 18). Clearly, the rationale for student participation and engagement extends well beyond good educational practice and into social policy, social development, health, and well-being.

Finally, meeting the social and economic needs of a 21<sup>st</sup>-century society demands that we nurture the talents, skills and aspirations of *all* young people in Canada. The emergence of a knowledge-based economy, combined with a more diverse and complex society, compels us to rethink schools and learning. More than ever before, Canada needs engaged young people who possess the skills, knowledge and dispositions necessary to become expert learners with a passion to learn throughout their lives and to contribute to a civil society.

## Are Canadian Youth Engaged at School?

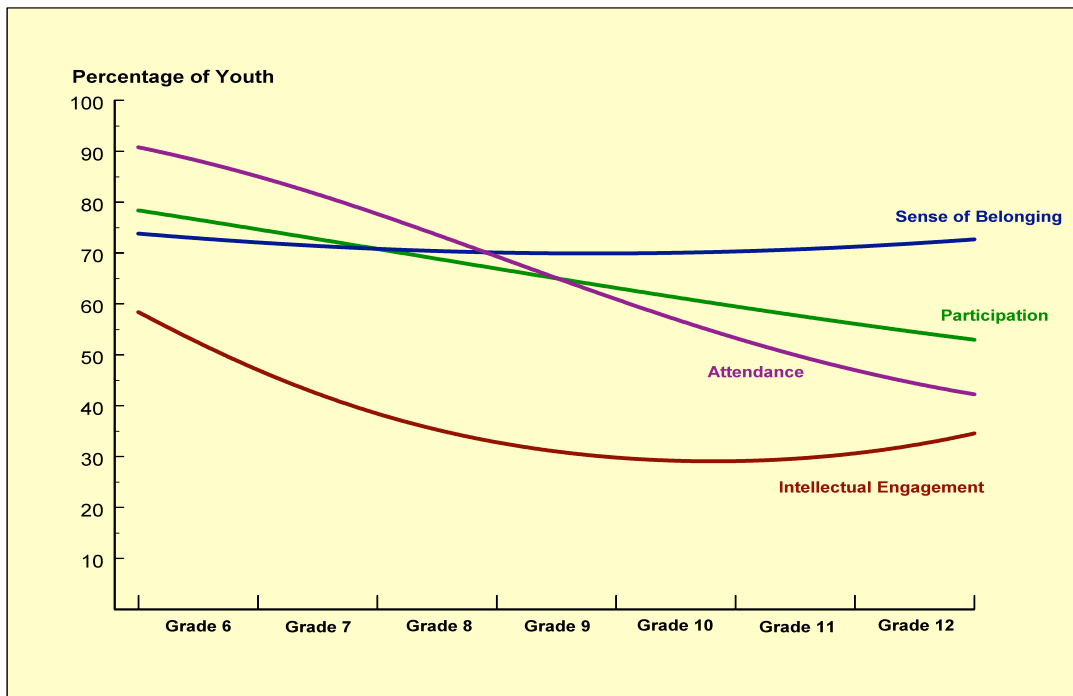
*Many students are engaged at school, but overall levels of engagement are quite low.*

First year findings from the 32,322 students in the *What did you do in school today?* national sample indicate that approximately 70% of youth participated in at least one school club or sport, had a positive sense of belonging at school, and had positive records of school attendance. In comparison, less than 40% of students are intellectually engaged in their language arts and mathematics classes.



*Student Engagement tends to fall steadily from grade 6 through to grade 12.*

With one exception social, academic and intellectual engagement decrease steadily with grade level. Students' sense of belonging remains at a fairly constant level throughout the middle and secondary school years, while participation (our second measure of social engagement), attendance and intellectual engagement fall steadily as grade level increases.



## Do Schools Make a Difference?

Similar to the findings from previous research, *What did you do in school today?* survey data show that students from high socio-economic (SES) environments are more likely to be engaged on all three dimensions than students from low SES environments. The relationship between SES and engagement is especially strong for intellectual engagement. However, first year findings also suggest that the relationship between engagement and what is happening in classrooms may be as - or even more - important than students' family background.

### *Levels of Student Engagement Vary Considerably Among Schools*

With the exception of sense of belonging, schools participating in the *What did you do in school today?* varied quite considerably in their levels of student engagement. We also found that schools with high levels of engagement in one area (e.g. social engagement) were more likely to have high levels of engagement in other areas.

Of the four measures of engagement in the survey, intellectual engagement varied most dramatically among all 93 schools and among different types of schools. For example, in elementary schools 62% of youth were intellectually engaged. In middle schools levels of intellectual engagement were only 44% and fell even further to 35% and 30% in middle-secondary and secondary schools respectively. Some of these differences can be explained by different grade level configurations in schools and the socioeconomic background of the students. However, even after these factors were taken into account there is still a significant amount of variation among schools.

Levels of Engaged Youth by School Type				
	Elementary	Middle	Middle-Secondary	Secondary
<b>Participation</b>	79	73	69	61
<b>Sense of Belonging</b>	74	70	66	71
<b>Attendance</b>	91	81	63	58
<b>Intellectual Engagement</b>	62	44	35	30

*More than 50% of the differences among schools are attributable to school and classroom-learning climate.*

Given the significant variation among schools we also wanted to understand if there were aspects of the classroom-learning environment associated with these differences. Looking at our data in this way we learned that family background has a strong influence on levels of engagement *within* schools, but over half of the variation *among* schools is a factor of school and classroom learning climates.

- Students are more likely to be socially engaged in schools with a positive classroom and school climate. High expectations for student success appears to be the most important factor.
- Students are more likely to have positive records of attendance when school and classroom learning climates include the following:
  - high expectations for student success
  - appropriate instructional challenge.



- Students are more likely to be intellectually engaged when school and classroom learning climates reflect the following:
  - effective use of learning time
  - positive teacher/student relations and disciplinary climates
  - high expectations for success
  - appropriate instructional challenge.

### Does instructional Challenge Make a Difference?

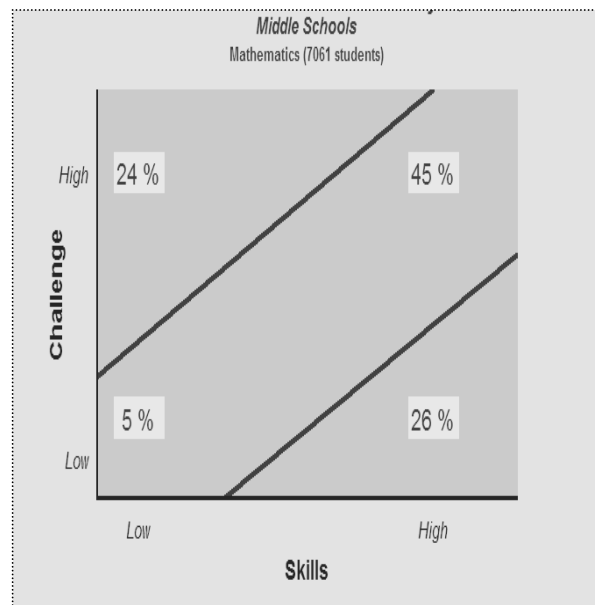
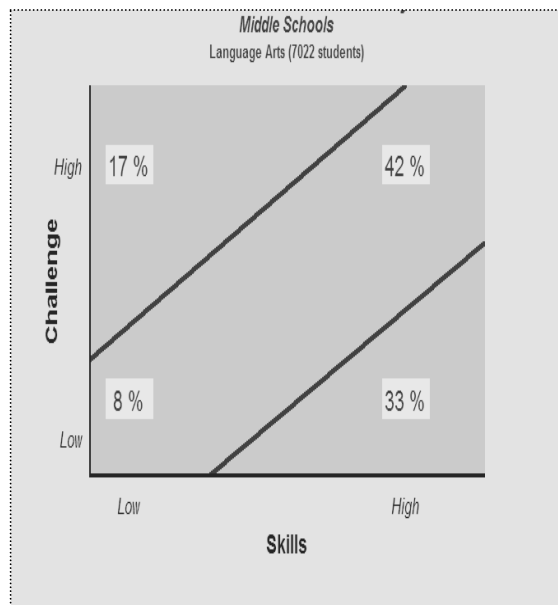
A new measure of the classroom-learning climate was developed for the *What did you do in school today?* survey based on Csikszentmihalyi's (1991) theory of 'flow'. Csikszentmihalyi (1997) described 'flow' as deep absorption in an activity that is intrinsically interesting. Individuals in a state of flow see the activity as worthwhile even if no further goal is reached.

Flow is believed to occur when there is a balance between the challenge inherent in the task at hand and the skills required to accomplish it. This relationship between skills and challenge is said to be symbiotic, where skills are neither too low nor too high in relation to the challenge at hand. Under flow theory, student engagement emerges in the culmination of concentration, interest, and enjoyment as opposed to boredom or apathy (Shernoff et al, 2003).

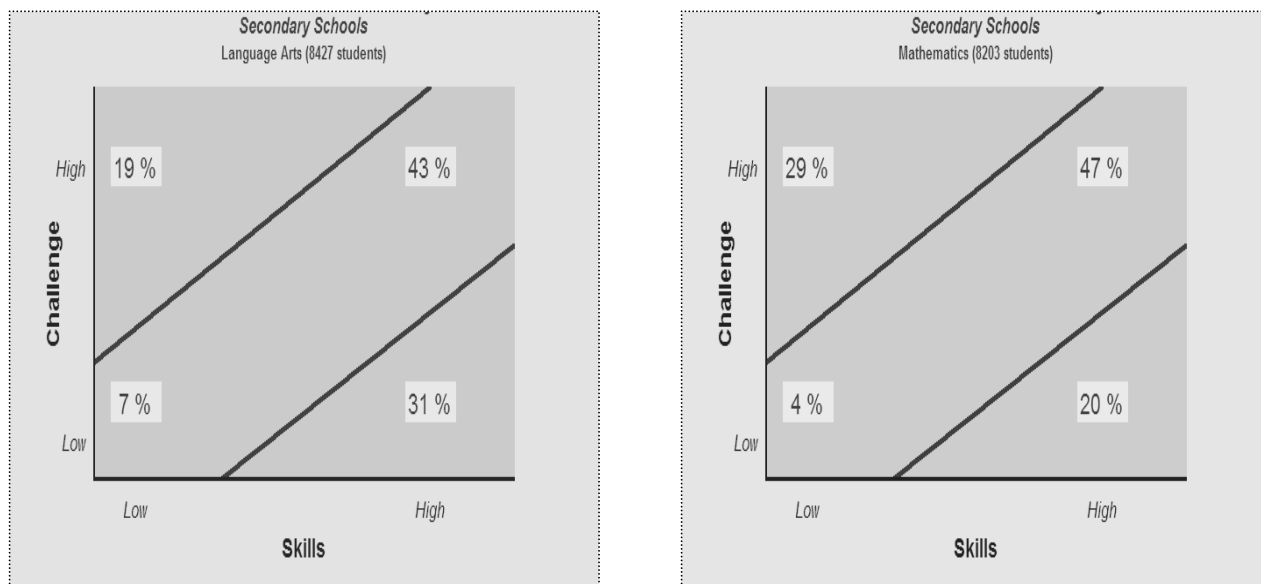
In the *What did you do in school today?* survey we asked students if they find instruction challenging in their math and language arts classes and whether they feel confident in their skills in these subjects through a series of twelve questions. Of the 32,322 students who completed a survey less than half reported that they are confident in their skill levels *and* are challenged in their math and language arts classes.

#### *Instructional Challenge in Canadian Middle and Secondary Schools*

Among Canadian middle school students just over 40 percent experience flow in learning. For other students, about one third feel confident in their skills, but do not feel adequately challenged in their math and language arts classes. One in five students feel that their classes are too challenging based on the confidence they have in their skills.



In high schools similar trends appear: although students' experiences of engagement in mathematics shift somewhat: more students experience a match between their skills and the challenge of the work they are asked to do, but a slightly higher number of students also feel that their math classes are too challenging compared to the confidence they have in their skills.



## What Have We Learned So Far?

Our first-year findings provide compelling evidence that schools differ substantially in their levels of student engagement, and that differences among schools have less to do with students' family background than they do with school policies and practices, particularly the learning climate (i.e., decisions about learning time, relationships, expectations for success, and how work is designed for students) established in the classroom.

The findings regarding challenge and skills (see *Flow in Canadian Middle and Secondary Schools*) suggest that there are two separate but parallel issues facing Canadian schools:

- *How do we design instruction for the significant number of middle and secondary school students who have low confidence in their literacy and/or mathematics skills and are prone to social, academic and intellectual disengagement?* The findings contribute further evidence about the importance of foundational skills in these core learning areas during students' first years at school, and the need to continue supporting the development of literacy and mathematics skills throughout the school years.
- *How do we challenge students who are confident in their skills?* Students who are not appropriately challenged are also prone to becoming disengaged from school, especially intellectually.

Through *Engaged in Learning* so far, we have gained an appreciation for using the concept of student engagement to think about the impact of curricular and instructional reforms. The dimensions of engagement, whether considered alone or together, draw attention to the importance of students' experiences in school; the connections among those experiences; and of school and classroom

practices that contribute to healthy human development, motivation to achieve, sense of confidence, pride in success at school, and other positive outcomes.

As the work proceeds at both the national and district levels, however, we must be careful to recognize that educators are not alone in their efforts to shift patterns of student engagement and achievement. What is happening in classrooms to promote student engagement is the primary focus of the *Engaged in Learning* initiative because we know that effective learning environments do make a powerful difference. But there are other important things that need to happen in and outside of schools to engage young people (e.g., community youth leadership initiatives, youth parliaments, national, provincial and municipal youth councils, and youth arts programs) *and* to address the social, economic and educational conditions that can improve or limit their opportunities in and outside of schools.

### **What's Next?**

Participating districts have told CEA that the initiative's student engagement framework (see page 4) and its teaching effectiveness model are meaningful to schools because they validate what many teachers have been thinking about and trying to achieve in their own classrooms. Schools have also welcomed new data from the *What did you do in school today?* survey and commented on its value in helping them understand students' experiences in schools and classrooms.

Although participating districts are working in different provincial and local contexts, the *Engaged in Learning* initiative is proving to be highly adaptable and an important starting point for new conversations and ideas about student engagement in learning. It will be an important priority in the second and third years of the initiative to build partnerships that will guide the research and help us all to capture and use the insights of educators and students across Canada.

In the next phases of the project CEA will continue to,

- refine the project's research framework and review the effectiveness of measures used so far in the *What did you do in school today?* survey, with a focus on developing a more robust measure of academic engagement;
- share stories from participating districts and identify the strategies that appear to be most effective for enhancing the learning experiences and outcomes for students;
- improve key concepts and an understanding the importance of all three dimensions of engagement;
- build on CEA's emerging teacher effectiveness framework; and
- develop a framework for building deeper connections between *What did you do in school today?* survey data and change strategies in collaboration with the school districts.

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Note - All URLs cited were active on February 3, 2009